

Hmong Refugees Find Adjustment to U.S. Painful

The Washington Post
The New York Times A12
The Washington Times
The Wall Street Journal
The Christian Science Monitor
New York Daily News
USA Today
The Chicago Tribune

Date 25 July 88

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Special to The New York Times

ST. PAUL — Under the tutelage of her American cousins, 8-year-old Kia Lor is learning about soap operas, baseball, hair styles and even this odd custom, she confided, of painting one's fingernails.

But behind her infectious smile and dancing black eyes, this little Hmong refugee has horrible memories of the jungles of Laos. Kia was shot eight months ago by Communists after her family had tried to escape into Thailand. She survived by pretending that she was dead as the gunmen kicked her bleeding body. Her mother did not have to pretend, and neither did four of her brothers and sisters.

"I want to be with my mother," said Kia, who came here last month to live with her uncle Yao Lo. "I should have died, too."

"Please," Mr. Lo has pleaded, "don't say that anymore."

More Hmong Coming to U.S.

She is among an estimated 9,000 Hmong who arrived in the United States this year, the largest number since 1980. The numbers have increased as the tribal people have lost much of the hope of ever returning to the mountains of Laos and as conditions in Thai refugee camps have worsened under a resentful Government there.

After California, Minnesota and Wisconsin have attracted the largest numbers of Hmong, immigration officials said. More than 13,000 Hmong refugees live in Minnesota, including 2,000 who arrived this year, and perhaps as an equal number are in Wisconsin. The two states appear an unlikely destination for the mountain tribespeople from Laos, given the states' cold winters and overwhelmingly white population.

But the Lutheran social service agencies here, along with other church-affiliated relief organizations, and the socially progressive tradition of these states, have fostered a generally hospitable environment for refugees. A significant number of the Hmong have moved here from other parts of the United States, including a migration from Philadelphia a few years ago, where some of the Hmong were subjected to robbery and beatings that appeared to be motivated by bias.

Still, the transition to American urban life here for the Hmong who had no written language until recent times, has been more difficult than for other Southeast Asian refugees. A majority of the Hmong here live in public housing projects, and social service agencies express fear that much of the community risks becoming trapped in a cycle of poverty.

"We're concerned about the potential development of an underclass," said John Petraborg, assistant commissioner of the Minnesota Human Services Department. "We're having talks with leaders of the Hmong community to encourage the idea of self-sufficiency."

Kia's uncle, Mr. Lo, works for the Lo Family agency here, a private group that helps Hmong, Laotian and Cambodian refugees adjust to American life. About 6,000 refugees who belong to the group pay dues of 50 cents a month.

For Kia, who lives in a two-story frame house with her uncle and his family, the standard of living is better than for most Hmong. Her uncle came to St. Paul in 1975, when many of the refugees were the better-educated Hmong who had worked for the United States in the Vietnam War.

In Danger in Laos

The alignment with United States forces left the Hmong despised and endangered by the Pathet Lao regime now ruling Laos. William Colby, former Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, testified in Congress after the Vietnam War that the Hmong had fought so loyally they should be accorded veteran's benefits under the G.I. Bill.

Some 40,000 Hmong, who have escaped into Thailand, are living in the Ban Vinai and Chiang Kham refugee camps.

It was to one of those refugee camps that Kai's family, along with more than two dozen other Hmong, tried to escape. In the darkness, the refugees crossed the Mekong River into Thailand on a raft, but were sent back to Laos apparently by Thai authorities. It was unclear why they were turned back. United States officials speculated that they had been unable to pay a bribe or that the Thai authorities had become reluctant to admit more refugees.

In any case, the bodies were found

riddled with bullets. Kia stayed by her mother's body for perhaps three days, until Thai fishermen found her wandering along the banks of the Mekong, dazed and filthy. Bugs had festered in the wounds on her arms and neck.

After Kia was taken to a hospital in Thailand, she told workers that her 18-year-old brother, Toua, was at the Ban Vinai camp. The brother, who had left Laos earlier, was found, and hospital workers helped him contact their uncle in Minnesota. Late last month, with the help of Senator Rudy Boschwitz and the State Department, Kia and Toua were flown here.

Largely because so many refugees have settled in Minnesota, Mr. Boschwitz toured the camps in Thailand in January. He tried to visit with Kia, whose plight had been called to his attention by the Lo Family, but when she saw Thai guards coming to get her, she became frightened and ran off.

"There were many nightmares," Mr. Lo said of his niece. "But she's going to be okay."

When she arrived here, Kia was so frightened that she could not look at anyone, even her newfound family. But her nine-year-old cousin, Julie Lo, soon became a trusted pal. Kia now wears a pixieish hair style, a dime store's ring and a pink shirt emblazoned with the logo, "Cutest."

The girls play baseball with some American neighbors and watch Julie's favorite soap opera, "Another World." They speak in the Hmong language, and Julie has taught Kia to write her name in English. In the fall, Kia will enroll in the public school here, studying English as a second language.

Kia smiles much more easily now. And she told her family she feels safe now because, "no one will kill me."